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The Development of Self-Perceptions in Children and Adolescents

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The Development of Self-Perceptions

Abstract

Developmental changes in self-perceptions were studied in children and adolescents in grades 4, 6, 8, 10, and 12. The responses of subjects to the question "Who am I?" were analysized by means of a 30-category scoring system. Children described themselves in terms of their physical appearance and their behavior, while adolescents referred to their beliefs and their interpersonal style. Few sex differences were noted. Adolescents did not use more categories than children, they used different categories.

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A small body of research exists in the area of self-concept development. Investigators have concerned themselves with age changes in such things as self-esteem, body image, and the disparity between perceived self and idealized self. However, in few of these studies is self-concept development conceived of as at least partly an outcome of changes in cognitive processes. Yet, developmental changes in self-perceptions and attitudes, and the organization of those perceptions and attitudes may reflect underlying cognitive changes.

The purpose of the present investigation is to explore one implication of such a conception. Specifically, it is hypothesized that with increasing age, self-perceptions, or more accurately self-descriptions, become less concrete and more abstract. It is suggested that young children primarily describe and define themselves in terms of concrete characteristics such as appearance, likes and dislikes, and possessions, while adolescents conceive of themselves more abstractly and describe themselves in psychological and interpersonal terms. This formulation is in agreement with Werner's notion that development leads to increased integration as reflected in the use of abstract constructs.

Few studies in the area of self-concept development bear on this question. However, investigations of the development of impression formation or person perception have consistently found that, with increasing age, other people are viewed in a way that is increasingly more interpersonal, complex and abstract. To the extent that developmental changes in self-perceptions are similar to changes in person perceptions, one would expect a similar result i.e., an increasing use of psychological and abstract terms to describe the self.

136 males and 126 females served as subjects in this study. The subjects were drawn from five grades--4, 6, 8, 10 and 12-- and the average age for the students within each grade was 10, 12, 14, 16 and 18 years respectively. The subjects were white, middle-class, average and above in intelligence and were from a suburban, academic, midwestern community. Subjects were administered the Twenty Statements Test in class groups. The Twenty Statements Test simply asks the respondant to give 20 answers to the question, "Who am I?" The test takes approximately 15 minutes to complete. A 30-category scoring system, devised by Gordon. (1968) was used to classify each answer. Table I shows the scoring system and gives a few illustrative examples for each category. For example, category 10, Social Status, was defined as any reference to the individual's or family's socioeconomic situation, such as middle-class or from a rich family. Category 22, Sense of Moral Worth was any reference to a moral evaluation of the self. The categories are reasonably exhaustive and rarely was an answer classified as uncodeable.

Two undergraduates were trained in the use of the system. Interjudge agreement was tested by having both coders score a sample of 20 tests drawn from the experimental population. Interjudge agreement was 85% (average agreement per test, 17/20 responses). Responses were then summarized for each age group by sex in terms of the number of subjects who answered each category at least once. Age changes for each sex were then determined by Chi-square tests performed on each category. Since there were 60 separate Chi-square tests performed, the possibility that a test would be significant by chance was high. Therefore, only p values less than .001 were considered significant. Table 2 shows the percent of subjects at each age using a category at least once.

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The results indicated that there were no developmental pattern differences for males and females, i.e., if the use of a category tended to increase or decrease, it tended to increase or decrease for both males and females. However, changes in the use of some categories were significant for only one sex. Females showed a decrease between childhood and adolescence in the use of the categories Name and Territory; while males showed a decrease in the use of the categories Tastes and Likes, and Possessions. Both sexes were more likely to use physical descriptions in childhood than in adolescence.

In addition, for both males and females, there was a significant increase between childhood and adolescence in the use of the following categories: Existential, e. g., I, myself; Abstract Category, a person, a human; Self-Determination, ambitious, a hardworker; Interpersonal Style, friendly, nice; and finally Psychic Style, happy, calm.

The pattern of the data indicates that there is very often more of a change in self-descriptions between ages 10 and 12 than at any other time. Thus, 12-year-olds are to some extent more like 18-year-olds than 10-year-olds. Perhaps reading a few of the protocols will illustrate this finding and will give a better idea of what children at different ages say about themselves. (Original spellings and emphasis have been retained).

These first responses are from a boy, age 9, in the 4th grade. Notice the concrete flavor of his self-descriptions; the almost exclusive use of the categories Sex, Age, Name, Territory, Likes, and Physical Self.

> My name is Bruce C. I have brown eyes. I have brown hair. I have brown eyebrows. I'am nine years old. I love! Sports. I have seven people in my family. I have great! eye site. I have lots! of friends. I live on 1923 P. Dr. I'am going on 10 in September. I'am a boy. I have a uncle that is almost 7 feet tall. My school is P. My teacher is Mrs. V. I play Hockey! I'am almost the smartest boy in the class. I love! food. I love fresh air. I love School.

Next is a girl, age 11½, in the 6th grade. Note that although she uses the category Tastes and Likes quite frequently, there is a heavy emphasis on interpersonal and personality characteristics.

> My name is A. I'm a human being. I'm a girl. I'm a truthful person. I'm not pretty. I do so-so in my studies. I'm a very good cellist. I'm a very good pianist. I'm a little bit tall for my age. I like several boys. I like several girls. I'm old-fashioned. I play tennis. I am a very good swimmer. I try to be helpful. I'm always ready to be friends with anybody. Mostly I'm good, but I lose my temper. I'm not well-liked by some girls and boys. I love sports and music. I don't know if I'm liked by boys or not.

Finally, are the responses from a girl, age 17 who is in the 12th grade. Here, note the strong emphasis on interpersonal descriptions, characteristic mood states, and the large number of ideological and belief references, the beginnings of the establishment of a world view.

> I am a human being. I am a girl. I am an individual. I don't know who I am. I am a Pisces. I am a moody person. I am an indecisive person. I am an ambitious person. I am a very curious person. I am a confused person. I am not an individual. I am a loner. I am an American (God help me). I am a Democrat. I am a liberal person. I am a radical. I am a conservative. I am a pseudo-liberal. I am an atheist. I am not a classifiable person (i. e.-- I don't want to be).

Contrast the responses of the previous 11-year-old with both the 9 and 17-year-old and I think you can see that the 11-year-old sounds more like the 17- than the 9-year-old. There may be a transitional period between the ages of 10 and 12 in the area of self-descriptions that corresponds to the transitional period from concrete to formal cognitive operations. To the extent that the 12-year-olds in this sample have begun to acquire the formal operational skills of hypothetical-deductive thinking and propositional logic, their thinking may more closely resemble those older adolescents who are in a similar stage rather than the younger children in a previous stage. Similarily, conceptualizations of the self by the 12-year-old may also be more like the older group than the younger group.

As Inhelder and Piaget have pointed out, adolescent thinking is a "second order system" in the sense that the adolescent does not solve problems in terms of concrete givens, but uses those concrete facts to form hypotheses about an underlying reality. Young children seem to characterize themselves in terms of descriptions of their behaviors. One might almost think of them as naive behaviorists. Adolescents, however, seem to infer from their behavior the existence of an underlying personality trait. For example, it is not uncommon for young children to say that they like to play baseball, football, hockey, soccer, and so on, An adolescent, however, will rarely present a list of behaviors such as that. Much more common would be to say: "I am an athlete," or "I like athletics." Thus, there is an integration of behaviors which leads the adolescent to infer a superordinate category.

It might be useful to think of the relationship between increasing cognitive abilities and self-descriptions as an attempt to more accurately and uniquely characterize the essence of the self. One notes an increasing use of descriptions which result in a sharper and more focused picture of the self, and which lead to a clearer differentiation of the self from others. For example, to describe oneself as a boy, 9-years-old, with brown hair and good eyesight is not to say much that will allow for a specific and unique characterization of the self. But, to describe the self as moody, indecisive, confused and a loner, results in a picture of this adolescent that is reasonably specific and differentiated from others.

In conclusion, one might say that what appears to be the self for the child is only a set of elements from which the adolescent infers a constellation of philosophical and psychological categories that uniquely characterize himself.

Table I

Who Am I Scoring Categories With Typical Examples

adapted from (Gordon, 1968)

1. Sex: a boy, a sister, a guy.

2. Age: 9½, a teenager, a senior.

3. Name: Susan, Bobby.

4. Racial or National Heritage: White, a Negro, Italian.

5. Religious Categorization: a Catholic, Jewish, Methodist.

6. Kinship Role: a son, a sister, engaged.

7. Occupational Role: hoping to become a doctor, paper-boy.

8. Student Role: a student, getting bad grades, a "B" student.

9. Political Affiliation: a Democrat, an Independent.

10. Social Status: middle-class, from a rich family.

11. Territoriality, Citizenship: an American, living on Oak Street.

12. Membership in Interacting Group: on the football team, in the science club.

13. Existential, Individuating: Me, myself, nothing, I.

14. Membership in an Abstract Category: a person, a human, a speck in the universe.

15. Ideological and Belief References: a liberal, a pacifist.

16. Judgments, Tastes, Likes; hate school, like sports.

17. Intellectual Concerns: a thinker, likes to read.

18. Artistic Activities: a dancer, singer, poet.

19. Other Activities: a hiker, a stamp collector, a swimmer.

20. Possessions, Resources: have a bike, own a dog.

21. Physical Self, Body Image: 5' 10", 125 lbs., fat.

22. Sense of Moral Worth: bad, good, honest, a liar

23. Sense of Self-Determination: ambitious, a hardworker.

24. Sense of Unity: mixed up, a whole person, in harmony.

25. Sense of Competence: good at many things, creative.

26. Interpersonal Style (how I typically act): friendly, fair, shy, cool, nice.

27. Psychic Style, Personality (how I typically think and feel): happy, sad, in love, calm.

28. Judgments Imputed to Others: popular, well-liked, loved

29. Situational References: going on a date tonight, bored with this.

30. Uncodeable Responses: the sea, a flower, dead.

Table 2

Percent of Subjects at Each Age Using Category at Least Once

	Females						Males					
Age	10	12	14	16	18		10	12	14	16	18	
Category												
Sex	43	83	46	47	70	*	47	63	30	48	74	*
Age	33	26	29	21	45		3	44	30	29	37	
Name	62	4	4	6	30	***	38	15	11	16	32	*
Race	0	4	0	12	25	**	9	4	4	13	5	
Religion	10	0	4	3	15		3	0	4	6	5	
Kinship	43	40	25	21	50		31	15	11	29	63	**
Occupation	5	9	21	29	50	**	3	15	37	26	37	**
Student	71	74	29	50	70	**	63	44	44	58	74	
Politics	0	0	7	6	5		0	0	0	0	5	
Soc. Status	5	0	0	3	5		3	0	0	0	0	
Territory	52	17	11	12	5	***	44	15	30	13	16	*
Inter. Grp.	57	52	46	53	60		56	26	22	23	53	**
Existential	0	52	18	26	55	***	0	15	19	26	53	***
Abstract Cat.	0	78	39	44	45	***	3	81	22	45	59	***
Ideological	5	13	32	21	40	*	3	15	15	26	37	*
Tastes, Likes	71	70	79	50	35	*	66	59	81	39	26	***
Intellectual	43	26	36	21	20		28	30	44	26	26	
Artistic	24	35	29	30	25		22	37	30	26	10	
Other Acts.	57	65	75	65	45		69	59	89	84	74	
Possessions	52	22	18	18	10	*	53	22	30	10	5	***
Physical Self	90	65	39	59	15	***	84	48	52	39	16	***
Moral Worth	5	30	11	21	20		3	15	22	35	32	*
Self-Determin.	0	4	29	47	45	***	9	11	22	42	53	***
Unity	0	0	18	18	20		0	0	11	16	21	*
Competence	33	26	29	41	40		38	48	59	55	32	
Interpersonal	33	96	96	82	90	***	50	56	85	90	95	***
Psychic Style	29	65	89	74	80	***	25	19	41	87	63	***
Judgments	24	26	25	21	60	*	22	19	22	35	53	
Situation	5	9	21	26	10		13	4	19	13	11	
Uncodeable	10	0	0	6	0		28	30	19	6	16	
N	21	23	28	34	20		32	27	27	31	19	

* Chi-square significant at .05 level
** Chi-square significant at .01 level
*** Chi-square significant at .001 level

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Footnotes

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